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Sealed in the Archives

THE FBI HAS taken one more important step to clear up an investigation that got out of hand and to repair the civil liberties violations that marked it. The investigation began in 1983 when an informant told federal investigators that the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) had links to international terrorists. The tip later proved unreliable, but not until an inquiry involving more than 2,300 people and 1,300 groups had been undertaken. Suspects included nuns, union organizers, lawyers and political party workers whose sole offense turned out to have been the holding of meetings and the organizing of opposition to American policy in Central America. Although evidence was not produced linking these people to international terrorist activity, copious FBI files were created on them.

To his credit, FBI Director William Sessions, who inherited the mess, has acted to make amends. He has publicly conceded that "the FBI is not proud" of the investigation. He agrees that the original informant was not thoroughly investigated, that his charges were accepted too readily and that the inquiry was expanded nationwide without cause. Because supervision from Washington was inadequate, six agents were disciplined and the attorney general's guidelines on terrorism investigations were amended. Nevertheless, CISPES members wanted more. Quite reasonably, they asked that their FBI

files be expunged or transferred to the National Archives, where access would be severely limited. Director Sessions has now agreed to that request.

Every federal agency has a schedule for the disposal of old files. After a period of time—30 or 50 years, for example—records are destroyed except for those of historical interest, which are sent to the Archives. In the case of the CISPES material, the timetable will be accelerated, and as soon as details have been worked out, files will be sent to the Archives. Because the material is now classified, it will remain inaccessible to the public and even to the FBI. Certain files necessary for the completion of litigation will be made available to lawyers, but the rest will be sealed.

Thousands of Americans, concerned about an aspect of this country's foreign policy and working perfectly legally to change it, were harassed and maligned by the CISPES investigation. Though the Senate Intelligence Committee found that the episode was "an aberration" not an example of continuing FBI policy, the civil liberties violations were substantial. It is important that the records of innocent citizens be sealed and that these unfounded allegations not continue to follow them throughout their lives. Placing the files in the Archives will give a measure of protection to those whose privacy was invaded and whose loyalty was unjustly called into question.